


Metra in Kendall County? Oswego officials hope to speed up commuter train talks

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Linda Girardi

 Oswego officials say they are poised to accelerate discussions to bring Metra commuter rail service to the Kendall County region.

"Now seems like a good time to discuss the progress of the project with the Village Board," Village Administrator Dan Di Santo said.

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Village trustees will discuss the Metra commuter project as a committee of the whole at 6 p.m. Tuesday at Village Hall, 100 Parkers Mill in Oswego.

Oswego officials are encouraged that the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning has formally endorsed extending BNSF commuter rail service from Aurora to Sandwich as a "high priority" in its On To 2050 comprehensive plan which was adopted by the group Oct. 10.

Di Santo said having the blessing of regional planners is significant. He said a better rating on the agency's list of priorities improves the chances that federal funds can be secured for the project.

One of the challenges for getting Metra commuter service beyond Aurora is money, he said. Studies done in 2001 and 2002 determined the rail extension was feasible for Oswego and Montgomery at that time, he said, which meant the population and ridership numbers were there to support operating commuter train service even then.

Since that time the region's population has more than doubled, and a higher percentage of the workforce from the area is commuting into Chicago than in communities that do have Metra stations such as Aurora, Joliet, Geneva and Elgin, Di Santo said.

"There is little debate that a station in Oswego is needed," he said. "The problem lies with the capital dollars required to bring a third rail out to our communities."

Di Santo said estimates to extend the rail line range from \$150 million to \$300 million, depending on the location of the last stop.

"There is no clear funding mechanism to pay for this improvement," he said. "In the best case scenario the federal government could contribute 50 percent of the capital cost ..."

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He said "that leaves the remaining 50 percent to be funded by the state or local sources, of which there is no current source. That is why we see a possible state capital bill as our best shot of beginning to secure that 50 percent local share."

Di Santo said that local communities will have to decide whether to join the Regional Transportation

"We believe that discussion will occur following the completion of the studies at the end of 2019," he said. "Before we can fully discuss joining the RTA, we need to know much more about the project such as where the last stop of the extension will be and the total cost of the capital project."

The RTA oversees Metra, Pace and the Chicago Transit Authority. Currently Kendall County is the only collar county in the region that is not a member of the RTA.

"There are two ways to join the RTA — one is to pass a referendum to join, which means a 0.75 percent sales tax would be implemented in Kendall County like the other collar counties," he said. "This is the traditional way, and would mean that not only would Kendall County pay into the Metra system but also would receive Pace bus services."

The second way to join is under "extra-territorial authority," he said, which essentially means whatever other deal you can work out with the RTA.

"This is the route we used to partner with the RTA to operate our Park and Ride facility," Di Santo said.

Di Santo said it is a good time to talk about the Metra project because it is an election year.

"With a state capital bill on the agenda of both gubernatorial candidates for the first time in a decade, we want to verify the importance of this project to the Village Board so that we can allocate the proper time and resources over the next six months to ensure our project is included in any capital bill," Di Santo said.

Oswego, Yorkville and Plano elected leaders have approved resolutions supporting the project.

Linda Girardi is a freelance reporter for The Beacon-News.